

**Possibility beyond Possibility:  
Discovering the traces of the non-spatial diaspora in Korean Literature**

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**Introduction**

Entitled “Possibility beyond Possibility: discovering the traces of the non-spatial diaspora in Korean Literature,” this study explores the matter of ‘hybridity’ in Korean literature intersecting post-colonial and diasporic discourses. I would like to critically examine ‘the bilingual generation’ which has been stipulated in Korean literature as a generation that needed translation process to write in Korean, as it was more natural for them to think and write in Japanese. Studies focused on discovering the hybridity of language and identity from this ‘bilingual generation’ which has been concealed under strong nationalism. Post-colonial discourses, closely related to Homi K. Bhabha’s ideas and her notion of ‘hybridity,’ were drawn significantly in these studies. However, the post-colonial analysis on ‘the bilingual generation’ had a hard time in surmounting the limitation of dichotomous ‘categorization,’ which easily draw hybridity into the rule of homogeneity.

This study aims to examine Korean language as a ‘non-pure,’ but therefore more powerful ‘hybridity’ carved in poems and critics from late 1960s to early 1980s in South Korea, intersecting the notion ‘hybridity’ in post-colonialism with the ‘hybridity’ in diasporic discourses. The goal of this study is to explore how the hybridity became a seed of powerful thoughts of infinite possibilities of ‘freedom’ in Korean literature, especially when hybridity was considered as an ever-present mode of life. A most beloved poet Kim Soo-Young, an important critic Kim Hyun, and another significant poet Jeong Hyun-Jong will be drawn into the discussion significantly.

**Monolingualism/Bilingualism**

To begin with, it would be helpful to scope out the historical background to understand why certain people in a particular period has been named ‘the bilingual generation.’ Japanese colonial rule lasted for 35 years from 1910 to 1945. It was enough time for people in colonized Chosun to be more or less bilingual speakers of Korean and Japanese. The Japanese Government General of Chosun gradually forbade Chosun people from speaking Korean, and coerced people into speaking only Japanese. Experiencing the ever-present pressure on being accused and getting punished by teachers or officers for speaking Korean, people in Chosun took this enforced bilingual situation as a condition of life. Especially for the young generation, thinking and speaking in Japanese rather than Korean became more natural and spontaneous.

Importantly, when Chosun was liberated from the colonial rule in 1945, one of the first things intellectuals focused on to build an independent nation was unifying languages into ‘the pure Korean.’ Bilingualism was considered as a vestige of Japanese imperialism which must be cleaned up. Here was the difficulty young writers had gone through. Poets, novelists, and

critics struggled writing in Korean, the language they were less familiar with. People at that time commonly performed their bilingualism in daily life, but for writers whether they use 'pure Korean' or not was criticized closely related to their qualification as intellectuals and critics on the society. Therefore, bilingualism consciously secreted itself in Korean literature, until it was drawn for a strategic classification of generations in 1980s.

It was a famous critic Kim Hyun who referred to those writers specifically as 'the bilingual generation' as following 'Hangeul generation' who was born at the end of the colonial rule and acquired only Korean as the first language under monolingual condition of the liberated Chosun. He found impotence and passivity in literary works of this 'bilinguals', and declared the source of such attitude must be the lack of trust and reliability on their own language, which is 'incomplete' and 'unstable'. Kim Hyun considered the 'unstable' hybridity of language as the cause and effect of the generation's suffering which the 'new generation' of himself must overcome. Bilingualism of language in Korean language and literature was appropriated for a project to seek for a 'new' 'optimistic' subject 'full of possibility' which would be possible only when the language is qualified as an assertive, assured, and 'homogeneous' one. And this project in 1980s lasted until quite recently.

### **Hybridity as a Blind Point**

In the 1990s, researchers discovered the bilingual writers in the liberation period in the line of deconstruction of the violence of homogeneity. To bring the existence of hybridity of language out of the powerful shade of monolingualism, they borrowed the category Kim Hyun formed, 'the bilingual generation.' With this classification, they successfully deconstructed the presumed homogeneity of monolingualism and drew attention to the matter of hybridity in Korean literature. However, not questioning the classification itself, they did not read how such categorization draws hybridity back to the realm of homogeneity in the binary relationship between 'hybridity' and 'homogeneity'.

For example, studies on the hybrid language of Kim Soo-Young show how stubbornly 'hybridity' was thought within the binary relation with homogeneity. Researchers overly relied on his Japanese writings which are very few among his prolificacy, and took a line in one of his poems without careful consideration: "I, gone through several times of immigrations of language." (Kim Soo-Young 347) They soundly claimed that Japanese was the language he felt more comfortable than Korean, and even though the language was oppressed by nationalism, it continuously came back to his writing. However, they took one more step reading his use of Japanese in public writing as a 'resistance' to the demand of homogeneity of nationalism. In that sense, Kim Soo-Young was praised as an 'exceptional resistant individual.'

Here we should find it significant that researches emphasized how actively his 'Japanese' was working 'against' Korean monolingualism. In the beginning, they found the language of 'the bilingual generation' as linguistic hybridity which could not integrated into homogeneity of language. However, paradoxically, at the end of their project, they placed Japanese as another 'monolingualism' which has infrangible power against Korean monolingualism, positioning Korean as a 'foreign language' in them. They shared the basic premise that our language structure is consisted with single or plural distinguishable language(s), which is not difficult to see how 'monolingual' this idea itself is, when we closely look into the problem. As concentrating on the dichotomous and hostile relationship between clearly separable 'languages' rather than not on the antinomic hybridity of the structure of

‘language’, the researches cannot help but repeat the logic of monolingualism.<sup>1</sup>

It is significant to see that no matter the focus is on an oppression of homogeneity on hybridity or a resistance of hybridity to homogeneity, if we ‘categorize’ hybrid existences with one particular manner and see them in a ‘relationship’ with supposedly existing homogeneity, we easily fall back into the logic of homogeneity in the name of ‘resistance.’ It seems to break the presence of such thing ‘homogeneous’, but rather, it produces another homogeneous idea and reinforces the weight of it. And there, hybridity remains isolated in the arena of competition among homogeneities.<sup>2</sup>

That is why this paper claims Kim Soo-Young’s language needs to be considered in different sense of ‘hybridity.’ If we stop separating his language into ‘Japanese’ and ‘Korean,’ we can concentrate on his attitude toward his own language and see beyond competition relationship. Kim Soo-Young did oppose monolingualism, but he did not see his language as a hostile relationship between ‘different’ languages of Korean, Japanese, and English. Rather, the hybrid state itself was what he thought his language ‘is’. And from there, Kim Soo-Young could emphasize that ‘language itself should be language of freedom.’

### **Hybridity, Non-Spatial Diaspora**

That is why I started looking at the ‘hybridity’ in discourses on diaspora. First of all, imagining why Kim Soo-Young called his own hybridity as a matter of ‘immigration’ is critical. Here is the phrase:

I, now easier to read an English text than Japanese one,  
I, gone through several times of immigration of language  
I, too fluent in Korean and now in trouble

Kim Soo-Young, “In a Resonance of Lies” (1967)

As mentioned before, the liberation in 1945 completely changed the language condition in Chosun, from Japanese monolingualism to Korean monolingualism. The important thing is that this dramatic change of linguistic environment happened in one singular place, the Korean Peninsula. It would not be an exaggeration to say that such a sudden switch was as much traumatic as an spatial ‘immigration’ from one linguistic sphere to the other, especially for people like Kim Soo-Young who accepted Japanese as their language of daily lives.

However, Kim Soo-Young shows that he took this migrating circumstance as a critical ground to discuss hybridity rather than an inevitable trauma of monolingualism. In a critical

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<sup>1</sup> I have tried to show the monolingual aspect of the idea of ‘bilingualism’ closely examining Kim Soo-Young’s works and criticizing researches on his bilingualism with Derridian idea on monolingualism. This paper is to expand the idea more broadly, touching more fundamental structure of thoughts. For more information, please see Hong, Sunghee. *Performance of Language in Bilingual Condition: Language as Error, Latitude, and Tacitness in Kim Soo-Young’s Literature*. Diss. Yonsei University, 2015. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Frantz Fanon continuously claimed that the efforts of post-colonial discourses are “logically inscribed from the same point of view as that of colonialism”(Fanon 212)

writing written in 1964, he deplored the lack of literary source for young writers. To him, they seemed to have little chance to surpass the existing Korean literature as they only read 'Korean' literature in 'Korean' as a model of homogeneous root of their identity. Comparatively, for the writers in his age, both 'Korean language' and 'Korean literature' was not what was given but what they had to find and build. They sought for 'what Korean language can be' rather than just using 'what it already is,' and the uncertainty of language was where their literary brilliance was expanded. As one of them, Kim Soo-Young saw the homogeneity of literary sources for young writers hopeless because it would make them hard to create possibility beyond what already seems possible.

No matter it is perfect or not, Kim Soo-Young appreciated the fact he could be exposed to overlapped monolingualisms and his literary world was built on the hybridity of language. Hybridity was a natural 'state' the world exist for him. Here I find the reason why he dedicated his writings to obscure binary 'lines' rampant in Korean society calling them '38<sup>th</sup> parallels,' which is the name of the ceasefire line between North and South Korea. Saying there are too many '38<sup>th</sup> parallels,' he showed constant introspection about categorization and objectification which reproduce the obsession with homogeneity of the society.

Whenever I write something, I am still haunted by some kind of line, like the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel. An obsession with the idea that I can perform 'the pure' only if stepping over this line. [...] Not long ago I thought it would be resolved as soon as the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel fades away. However, now I presume that other lines would be formed so easily even if the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel vanishes. [...] After all, it concludes with 'no freedom, no democracy.'

Kim Soo-Young, "Helpless Literary Theory" (1964)

His concern on 'the 38<sup>th</sup> parallels' was about dividing 'zones,' which usually ends in forming a homogeneous and therefore mostly dichotomous and blind structure. So he fought for not making his own language as another 'line' or 'zone' and keeping it as a site of freedom which meant to him 'hybridity' itself. This is the point that reminds me of diasporic idea on 'deterritorialization,' which emphasizes the possibility to exist not necessarily with concrete territory.

Deterritorialization implies staking identity outside originary claims to a land. These non-territorial claims may still be about nationality but they cannot make the argument that this sense of nationality is derived from the land. Many diasporic groups can be called deterritorialized because their collective claims to an identity do not depend upon residence on a particular plot of land. (Kalra, Raminder, and Hutnyk 32)

Diasporic discourses rid hybridity of the ex post resistance to homogeneity and open new possibility for the constant 'presence' of hybridity that fundamentally questions seemingly homogeneous 'zones.' Although the notion 'diaspora' includes the relational structure between 'the one we left' and 'the one we arrived,' we still can appropriate its statement of the durability of hybrid existence, as supposing the post-colonial hybridity of language in Korean literature

as a non-spatial diaspora.<sup>3</sup>

Appropriating the famous post-colonial diasporic slogan “we are here because you were there,” Korean post-colonial non-spatial diaspora can say “we are here because we were here.” Korean people in certain period experienced diasporic ‘immigration’ from one language condition to the other. However, the ‘immigration’ did not made the people to choose one of those languages but rather let them use language itself as a hybrid form. And people such as Kim Soo-Young stayed with this hybridity of their language, discovering language with no territorial limits.

Therefore, it was not just few writers’ resistant performance of language. It was an opening of language itself toward possibilities beyond any kinds of homogeneous and therefore repressive powers. As a ‘language of freedom,’ the language of Korean literature could survive the violent and oppressive dictatorships as a site where possibility of possibility is actively alive. I would like to conclude this paper exploring how the idea of language as a hybridity enabled writers to see a possibility beyond possibility, resistance beyond resistance to bear the oppressive years.

## Conclusion

By 1980s, the belief on the monolingual Korean faded away. It was mostly because it became hard to imagine ‘pure Korean.’ Linguists pointed that the Korean language had always exchanged influence with Japanese language even before the colonial period, and moreover, younger people’s language appeared as clearly hybrid form of syntactic grammars of Korean, Japanese and English. Now young poets used their hybrid language at their pleasure regardless of the accusation of ‘translationese.’ Interestingly, again, Kim Hyun was the one who sensitively discovered the ‘translationese’ of young poets as a power of the literature of the younger generation. He praised Jeong Hyun-Jong, for example, for his great command of western style grammar on Korean and found an energy which he believed would not be expected in ‘natural’ Korean sentence.

Jeong Hyun-Jong’s position in the history of poetry lies where the folksy feminism of Seo Jeong-Ju swept through the 50’s is overcome by the androcentrism of Yu Chi-Hwan, Park Du-Jin, and Kim Soo-Young with Sino-Korean language and the individualism depended on the syntax of western languages. [...] In that he believes the world is agonizing and hopeless and in this kind of world life merely ends up with death, he is a pessimistic realist. However, in that he has belief in that he can struggle with the meaninglessness of the world from the very inside, he is an optimistic realist. His realism is individualistic in that it is built on the freedom of the individual, and it is liberalistic in that he does not impose his own view of the world oppressively. This is where he differentiate himself from Yu Chi-Hwan, Park Du-Jin, and Kim Soo-Young. There Jeong Hyun-Jong creates one of the most beautiful waterways of 70s Korean

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<sup>3</sup> It is already considered in diaspora discourses that ‘diaspora’ does not necessarily happen because of migration. “After the struggle for independence, a third country, Bangladesh, came into formation and thus a new diaspora formed. Strictly speaking, both the Eritrean and Bangladeshi diasporas were not constituted through migration, exile, trade or any of the other reasons previously given, but nominally arose due to the creation of new nations.”(Kalra, Raminder, and Hutnyk 19) Examining diverse forms of non-spatial post-colonial diaspora would expand both post-colonial and diasporic discourses.

literature. (Kim Hyun 20)

It is obvious that contemporary Korean poetry was not free from the charge of ‘the vestiges of Japanese colonialism’ or ‘contaminated history’ and it had to deal with the obsession with homogeneous quality of the developing society. There the ‘hybridity’ form of language had to be thought as ‘non-pure’ language. However, as Kim Hyun said about Jeong Hyun-Jong, “it might be an unbearable violence to purists and nationalist, [...] but after all it is a style we should acknowledge as ‘Korean.’” (Kim Hyun 21) And that hybrid Korean language was where the possibility of literature under dictatorships went beyond its own limit. Kim Soo-Young’s words would come back here again, expanding the possibility of language itself: “the most beautiful word of Korean? It is the words actively alive in our lives.” (Kim Soo-Young 377)

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